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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001484

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: GOF SUPPORTS U.S. LINE ON FULL, IMMEDIATE SYRIAN
WITHDRAWAL FROM LEBANON

REF: A. STATE 039018

- [1](#)B. PARIS 1401
- [1](#)C. PARIS 1366
- [1](#)D. PARIS 1268

Classified By: DCM Alex Wolff, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: MFA officials stressed agreement with U.S. views on seeking full and immediate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, but voiced caution on Hizballah. We note that French public statements on Syrian withdrawal hedge slightly on the question of full withdrawal before elections and the French reaction to Bashar al-Asad's March 5 speech was less negative than that of the U.S. A March 7 joint Franco-German statement on Lebanon called for withdrawal of Syrian troops and security services "as soon as possible." Meanwhile, MFA officials are not commenting on a March 6 press report that a former head of Syrian Military Intelligence recently visited France to present information on French hostage in Iraq Florence Aubenat. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) DCM raised ref (a) points with FM Barnier's Cabinet Director Pierre Vimont March 6, which we followed up March 7 with MFA DAS-equivalent for Levant Affairs Christian Jouret. Vimont noted that there had been a conversation earlier in the day on the general subject between the NSC and Elysee, and undertook to pass our request on. He also cited French concern about Hizballah's planned demonstration in Beirut March 8. Jouret reported that the GoF fully agreed with our message that Asad's March 5 speech was insufficient, though an MFA declaration issued the same day (text in para 5) did not exactly say so publicly. The GoF agreed that Syria's rhetoric should be followed by action, and that withdrawal should begin immediately and be complete by the time elections begin, to include all Syrian military intelligence (SMI) personnel as well. He confirmed that the GoF had reinforced the need for a full and immediate withdrawal with Syrian Deputy FM Muallem, while President Chirac had discussed the issue by phone with President Mubarak over the weekend, and would continue to press the point with other European and Arab interlocutors. (Note: Chirac and President Schroeder issued a joint statement, text in para 5, calling for full withdrawal of Syrian troops and security services from Lebanon "as soon as possible," on the margins of a summit meeting in Germany. End note.) It was clear, according to Jouret, that Bashar al-Asad was under pressure and knew he was in a grave situation; therefore, this was not the moment for the international community to relent.

[1](#)3. (C) The one point Jouret questioned was our reference to forming "a united front" against third parties seeking to disrupt efforts to achieve peace and exercise political will, saying he was unsure what the U.S. meant by this reference or whether France would be supportive. Poloff explained that we must remain vigilant and unified in rejecting any attempts to disrupt or use violence to destabilize the opposition, especially as Syria was seeking to mobilize pro-Syrian demonstrations and with Hizballah's plans to demonstrate on March 8. Jouret agreed on the need to be alert to the possibility to violence and said it was an open question whether it would be used to suppress the opposition. On Hizballah, he commented that its statements that it was not against the opposition had been "relatively encouraging" and showed that the movement had some political sensitivity, although the planned demonstrations tomorrow remained a worrisome development.

[1](#)4. (U) We asked Jouret about a press report in the March 6 French newspaper "Journal de Dimanche," citing an "unnamed Near Eastern source" as reporting that former Syrian Military Intelligence Major-General Hassan Khalil had visited Paris for three days around February 25, to present information about French journalist Florence Aubenat, held hostage in Iraq since January 5 (ref b). Jouret said he had not heard of any such visit and was not aware of the article, and stressed that he had no involvement in the Aubenat case. (Comment: The article contained apparent inaccuracies, such as failing to note that Khalil was replaced February 14 by President Asad's brother-in-law, Asif Shawkat, for whom the article said Khalil was the "right hand man." End comment.) The MFA spokesperson offered no comment, but did not deny the Khalil story, when asked about it at the March 7 daily press briefing.

15. (U) The following are informal translations of the text of the MFA statement issued March 5, shortly after the Asad speech, and the March 7 Franco-German Declaration on Lebanon issued on the margins of the Chirac-Schroeder summit in Bloomberg, Germany:

Begin text of March 5 MFA statement: We take note of the announcement by the Syrian President of his decision to apply UNSCR 1559. We expect therefore that he will withdraw entirely his troops and intelligence services from Lebanon as soon as possible. We also await support without reservations from the Syrian and Lebanese authorities for the UN commission of inquiry on the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. We wish for the rapid formation of a Lebanese government and the holding of fair and transparent elections, under the observation of international observers. We have confidence in the capacity of the Lebanese people to unite and decide for themselves freely. End text.

Begin text of March 7 Franco-German Declaration on Lebanon: Germany and France reaffirm their attachment to the independence, sovereignty, and democracy of Lebanon. We take note of the announcement by the Syrian President of his decision to apply UNSCR 1559. We expect Syria to withdraw entirely its troops and security services from Lebanon as soon as possible. It is well understood that we will be vigilant on the timetable of steps to come, and, like all of the international community, we will remain mobilized. We follow with much attention the mission which the Special representative of the Secretary-General of the UN will make soon to Beirut and Damascus. We expect as well from the Lebanese and Syrian authorities their full cooperation with the UN commission of inquiry sent on the ground to shed light on the assassination of Mr. Hariri. It is in this manner that free and transparent elections can take place, permitting the Lebanese people to decide for themselves democratically. End text.

16. (C) Comment: There continues to be a slight nuance between the tough private line and public positions the GoF is taking on Syria/Lebanon. While the GoF continues to stress the need for a "full and immediate" Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, it is not declaring as vociferously as the U.S. that full withdrawal should take place before the elections start, though the February 28 Chirac-Kwasniewski joint communique on Lebanon declared that full withdrawal of Syrian troops and security services was necessary for the elections' success. FM Barnier, when pressed during an March 6 radio interview whether the withdrawal should happen before elections, said, "that would be ideal and that is what we would all like, for Syria to withdraw rapidly, completely -- in effect, for the Lebanese people really to be masters of their own destiny and to have freedom of choice by the time these elections take place." Similarly, we think the French will take a cautious public stance on the planned March 8 demonstrations led by Hizballah, in a desire to avoid alienating the Shi'a community in Lebanon, and avoid fueling Hizballah accusations of U.S. and French interference in Lebanon's affairs. End comment.
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